CRCJ 4002B True Crime Media
Winter 2026
Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice
Carleton University

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Office hours: please email for an appointment

Brightspace course page:
https://brightspace.carleton.ca/d2l/home/364978

Online seminar: Thursdays 11:35 to 2:25pm

Prerequisites: CRCJ 1000, CRCJ 2100, and 4th year standing.

Course Description: This course is a 4th year special topics seminar about true crime media and its relationship to criminology. This course provides a brief history of the true crime media genre with an emphasis on relevance to criminology; a critical examination of the genre, popular and academic discourses regarding true crime, as well as the ethics of producing and consuming true crime media. Students will explore and critically engage with a range of thematic topics curated to challenge us to think critically and creatively about how criminology and true crime both challenge and complement each other.

Course Materials and Texts:

All required course materials will be hyperlinked or posted to the course Brightspace page. Students will require access to a computer with a microphone and camera, as well as internet access.

There are no additional costs associated with this course.

Acknowledgement & Affirmation:

Ni manàdjiyànànig Màmìwininì Anishinàbeg, ogog kà nàgadawàbandadjig iyo akì eko weshkad. Ako nongom egawìkàd kì mìgiwewàdj. Ni manàdjiyànànig kakina Anishinàbeg ondaje kaye ogog kakina eniyagizidjig enigokamigàg Kanadàng eji ondàpinangig endàwàdjin Odàwàng. Ninisidawinawànànig kenawendamòdjig kije kikenindamàwin; weshkinìgidjig kaye kejeyàdizidjig. Nigijeweninmànànig ogog kà nìgànì sòngideyedjig; weshkad, nongom; kaye àyànikàdj.

We pay respect to the Algonquin people, who are the traditional guardians of this land. We acknowledge their longstanding relationship with this territory, which remains unceded. We pay respect to all Indigenous people in this region, from all nations across Canada, who call Ottawa home. We acknowledge the traditional knowledge keepers, both young and old. And we honour their courageous leaders: past, present, and future.

Content Warning

Students should review the syllabus in advance of deciding to participate in this course; students who feel they cannot participate in academic discourse related to any of the topics or assigned readings are encouraged to enrol in a different seminar course.

Online Seminar Format

While students are very familiar with lecture-style classes wherein the professor lectures at students, delivering concepts, information, and knowledge at an audience of students; students are sometimes less familiar with university seminars. Seminar courses are small and more collaborative than lectures. **The success of a seminar is based in part on the engagement and participation of students** in discussion—asking and answering questions, making connections to current events, etc.—and activities.

Because this course is synchronous (live) and online, it is even more important that students be prepared for class by having completed the readings, submitted discussion questions, and taking notes. Despite the fun topic of this course, it is still a serious fourth-year academic course. Registration for this course fills up quickly and so I would ask that students weigh their interest in the topic and commitment to the workload at the start of term in case another course may be a better fit for what they are hoping to get out of this class.

The participation grade for this course is **not** based on being "present," i.e., being signed onto the class Zoom link. <u>Students enrolled in this course are expected to have access to a working camera and microphone</u>.

Students are expected to have their cameras on for most of the class and for most of the weeks of the course. To **earn** a passing participation grade students must have their cameras on and be ***actively participating*** in discussion, asking questions, and small group activities.

"The Sitting in Option": For Days When You Want to Engage in the Material But Are Experiencing Limitations

Of course, students will likely have occasions where they would be absent from an in-person class due to illness, a mental health day, or another reason.

Because this is an online but synchronous class, I do want to extend the option for students to "sit in" on class without the expectation of regular participation with camera on. For example, you're feeling unwell and would not be attending an in-person class but do not want to miss the topic of discussion, so rather than discouraging a student from signing onto the class, this option allows students to observe without the expectation of active participation.

This "sit in" option may be used up to three times over the term; students wishing to use this option can use an image instead of having their camera on which will signal to the professor that you would like to observe class, students in this case will not be called upon or assigned group activities unless a student specifies they would like to be included, and students are-- of course-- still welcome to interject. This "sitting in" option can count for partial marks where students do elect to participate.

Students who miss four or more classes are unlikely to receive a passing grade on participation, as this represents 1/3 of seminars.

Students with concerns or in need of accommodation should reach out to the instructor as soon as possible:
meg.lonergan@carleton.ca

Learning Outcomes

Successful completion of this seminar course contributes to the following learning outcomes:

- o Analyze and problem solve through critical thinking
- o Demonstrate clear and effective communication skills, including both written and oral communication
- o Construct a thesis, conduct research, and craft arguments supported by evidence in support of said these, as well as defending against potential critics of one's argument
- o Demonstrating engagement and understanding of course materials, themes, and concepts by applying them in course assignments
- o Engage in popular criminology bridging academic criminology and popular culture, to think about making criminology and its theories more accessible to the wider public
- o Explain the relevance of criminology to true crime media and true crime to criminology; employ a multidisciplinary criminological perspective

Course Assignments

Below are overviews of the required course assignments and their corresponding grade weight. All assignments must be successfully completed to pass the course. **Full assignment instructions and corresponding grading rubrics are available on Brightspace.**

Course Outline Quiz: 5%

- Must successfully complete by January 22nd
- Ensures students familiarity with course policies and expectations

Active seminar participation & weekly discussion question submission: 20%

- Cumulative over 12 weeks of the course
- Students must submit discussion questions based on the readings assigned for the week the day before the class for which the readings are assigned to help ensure they stay on top of the readings and are prepared for seminar discussion
- One discussion question per reading (2-3 questions per week)
- Discussion question submissions are due by 4pm on Wednesday each week and late submissions will not be accepted.
- See further instructions on Brightspace.

"True Crime and Criminology" Writing Assignment: 20%

- Due Friday, February 13th by 4pm
- Students write an academic paper on a chosen thesis related to true crime (media) and criminology
- See further instructions and rubric on Brightspace

"March Madness" Fandom Activity: (5%+10%) **15%**

- o See Brightspace for full details
- o Part I due February 27th by 4pm via Brightspace 5%
- o April 2nd in class activity 10%

Are you ready to rumble?

Back by popular demand! This assignment was previously part of the participation grade for this course, but students put in so much effort it has been promoted to being its very own assignment. While some of the other course activities weren't so easily translated from in-person to the online context (RIP class witch hunt), this assignment was able to make the jump into digital space.

The last week of the course is dedicated to "Fandoms," where we will explore scholarly research and journalism on the fan culture of true crime both in terms of true crime content producers and fan culture about infamous criminal offenders.

"March Madness" is inspired by the recurring *Last Podcast on the Left* special episodes of the same name, which the podcast has produced every five years to commemorate their true crime podcast show. Like the college basketball "March Madness" competition, brackets will be set up for "competitions," and the winner will move on to the next round. Sample episodes are available on the Brightspace page, as well as last year's bracket as examples.

Is this course secretly Fight Club?

First off, you just broke the first rule of Fight Club. Secondly, there will be no physical combat (nor foolish wand waving) in this course. **March Madness is a debate-based activity that will require students to participate in true crime fan culture.**

March Madness is an imaginary match-up of arena battles between fictional and real-world "bad guys." Students will submit a list of ranked "baddies," a mix of <u>both</u> real-life and fictional villains, criminals, public enemies, offenders, or however else the prompt is interpreted by students. I will cross compare all submissions and post who will be "fighting" on behalf of which "character." Students will argue for why their character would win in an arena-style gladiator battle, addressing both known— and imagined—qualities and characteristics for both offensive and defensive tactics. Students will vote for who they think won each battle.

Part I: Due February 27th by 4pm 5%

For Part I of this assignment, students will submit their five choices of **both fictional and real-world "baddies"** that they are interested in arguing for in the arena in the last week of class.

Students should clearly rank their choices from 1 to 5 with 1 being their top choice. Please be sure to be as specific as possible, i.e., please do not write "Batman," but rather specify Adam West's portrayal of Batman, or George Clooney's Batman, etc. Cartoon characters are allowed.

<u>Ground Rules to Keep in Mind:</u>
- o Cannot transport outside of the arena
- o Access to weapons and accessories appropriate to the character (i.e., John Wayne Gacy comes with clown costume and accessories and construction tools; Gremlins mess with electric components; the shark from *Jaws* has access to an appropriately sized tank in the arena, etc.)
- o *Knowledge and creativity are both assets in competition*

Part II Execution Day: In Online Class on April 2nd 10%

Students will participate in the posted brackets and fight to become the 2026 champion of the True Crime Media March Madness competition.

- o *Last year's winning "baddie"*: Edward Snowden
- o *Runner up:* Cruella De Vil

Post-competition we will wrap up the final class discussing how this activity engages content from all the previous weeks of the course; changed or reinforced previously held thinking about true crime media and fandom culture(s); and how it embodies other course themes and considerations.

Final Project Proposal: 10%

- o Due Friday, March 6th by 4pm
- o Students will submit a final project proposal to ensure they are set up for success on the final project
- o Students may revise and resubmit this assignment within one week of receiving feedback for further feedback and a revised grade

Final Project: 30%

- o See Brightspace for details and rubric
- o Students will produce a 15-to-20-minute podcast or video on a topic related to the course
- o May be completed individually or in pairs
- o Due by noon on April 23rd

<u>Course Schedule</u>

Week 1: January 8th

Introduction to True Crime

Bolin, Alice. (2018). The ethical dilemma of highbrow true crime. *Vulture*.

Schechter, Harold. (2012). Our long-standing obsession with true crime. *Creative Nonfiction*, 45, 6-8.

Wiltenburg, Joy. (2004). True crime: The origins of modern sensationalism. *The American Historical Review*, 109(5), 1377-1404.

Week 2: January 15th

History of True Crime Media

Curtis, L. Perry. (2001). "The Theory and Practice of Victorian Journalism," in <u>Jack the Ripper and the London Press</u>, Yale University Press, pp. 48-64.

Curtis, L. Perry. (2001). "Sensation News," in <u>Jack the Ripper and the London Press</u>, Yale University Press, pp. 65-82.

Flanders, Judith. (2011). "Trial by newspaper," in <u>The invention of murder: How the Victorians revelled in death and created modern crime.</u> London: Harper Press, pp. 20-98.

Week 3: January 22nd

Storytelling

Boling, Kelli S., and Slakoff, Danielle C. (2025). 'What an invasion, an immense invasion': Examining the adverse effects of true crime media on co-victims. *Crime Media Culture*, 1-20.

Voss, Ralph F. (2011). "The myth of the nonfiction novel," in *Truman Capote and the Legacy of in Cold Blood.* Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, pp. 80-99.

Webb, Lindsey. (2021). True crime and danger narratives: Reflections on stories of violence, race, and (in)justice. *Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice*, 24(1), 131-170.

Suggested: Lonergan, Meg D. (2023). Consuming ghost stories: The spectre of snuff films is haunting Canadian obscenity. *The Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Research*, 12, 146-177.

Week 4: January 29ᵗʰ

Monsters, Possession, and Witchcraft

Green, Ian. (2020). Daemons in the pocket: Contract, commodities and witchcraft in Massachusetts Bay. *Horror Studies*, *11*(1), 43–61.

Platt, Anthony M. (1965). The origins and development of the 'wild beast' concept of mental illness and its relation to theories of criminal responsibility. Issues in Criminology, 1(1), 1-18.

Possamai, Adam., and Gower, Rhys. (2025). Digital exorcism and morality. *Journal of Sociology*, 61(2), 308-320.

Week 5: February 5ᵗʰ
Forensics and Junk Science

Cole, Simon A. (2015). A surfeit of science: The 'CSI effect' and the media appropriation of the public understanding of science. *Public Understanding of Science*, 24(2), 130-146.

Kessler, Gary C. and Carlton, Gregory H. (2017). Exploring myths in digital forensics: Separating science from ritual. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Telecommunications and Networking*, 9(4), 1-9.

Oliva, Jennifer D., and Beety, Valena E. (2019). Regulating bite mark evidence: Lesbian vampires and other myths of forensic odontology. *Washington Law Review*, 94(4), 1769-1829.

Further reading: Fabricant, M. Chris. (2022). Junk Science and the American Criminal Justice System. Brooklyn, New York: Akashic Books.

Week 6: February 12ᵗʰ

True Crime Documentary

Guest speaker: Canadian documentary filmmaker Kier-La Janisse

Morton, Phoebe. (2021). Stylistic choices in true-crime documentaries: The duty of responsibility between filmmaker and audience. *Media Practice and Education*, 22(3), 239-252.

Rickard, Diana. (2023). Truth or doubt: Questioning legal outcomes in true-crime documentaries. *Law and Humanities*, 17(1), 60-89.

Stoneman, Ethan., and Packer, Joseph. (2021). Reel cruelty: Voyeurism and extra-juridical punishment in true-crime documentaries. *Crime Media Culture*, 17(3), 401-419.

<mark>**"True Crime and Criminology" Writing Assignment: 20%**</mark>

   o Due Friday, February 13ᵗʰ by 4pm

Winter reading week: February 16ᵗʰ to 20ᵗʰ

Week 7: February 26ᵗʰ

"And that's when the cannibalism started…"

Johnson, Thea., and Gilden, Andrew. (2015). Common sense and the cannibal cop. *Stanford Journal of Civil Rights & Civil Liberties*, 11(2), 313-330.

Lefebvre, Martin. (2005). Conspicuous consumption: The figure of the serial killer as cannibal in the age of capitalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(3), 43-62.

Palermo, Mark T., and Bogaerts, Stefan. (2015). The dangers of posthumous diagnoses and the unintended consequences of facile associations: Jeffrey Dahmer and Autism spectrum disorders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 59(14), 1564-1579.

   o <mark>**March Madness Part I due February 27ᵗʰ by 4pm via Brightspace**</mark>

Week 8: March 5ᵗʰ

The Satanic Panic

Hicks, Robert D. (1991). "The Police Model of Satanic Crime," in J. Best, J. T. Richardson, & D. G. Bromley (Eds.), The Satanism Scare (1st ed.). Routledge, pp. 175–190.

Victor, Jeffrey S. (1993). *Satanic panic: The creation of a contemporary legend*. Open Court, pp. 274-310.

Further reading: Echols, Damien. (2012). *Life after Death: The Shocking True Story of an Innocent Man on Death Row* (1st ed.). Text Publishing Company.

o **Final Project Proposal Due Friday, March 6ᵗʰ by 4pm**

Week 9: March 12ᵗʰ

Won't Somebody Think of the Children?!

Petley, Julian. (2011). Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 83-114.

Kohm, Steven A. (2020). Claims-making, child saving, and the news media. *Crime Media Culture*, 16(1), 115-137.

Marwick, A., Smith, J., Basnight, B., Boyles, D., Donnelly, M., Kaczynski, S., Ringel, E., Whitmarsh, S., & Yabase, C. (2024). Child-Sacrificing Drag Queens: Historical Antecedents in Disinformative Narratives Supporting the Drag Queen Story Hour Moral Panic. *Women's Studies in Communication*, *47*(4), 459–479.

Or

Peterka-Benton, D., Benton, B., & Penney, J. (2025). From conspiracy to normalcy: The mainstreaming of QAnon in "Disney grooming" messages online. *Crime, Media, Culture*, *21*(2), 169–186.

Week 10: March 19th

Cults

Baća, B. (2024). QAnon and the Epistemic Communities of the Unreal: A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Grassroots Conspiracism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *41*(4), 111-132.

Bleakley, Paul. (2021). The cult of corruption: Reframing organizational frameworks of police corruption from a cultic perspective. *Deviant Behaviour*, 42(5), 565-577.

Urban, Hugh. (2011). "The 'Cult of All Cults'? Scientology and the Cult Wars of the 1970s and 80s," in <u>The Church of Scientology: A History of a New Religion.</u> Princeton University Press, pp. 118-154.

Recommended: Hume, Lynne. (1996). A Reappraisal of the Term "Cult" and Consideration of "Danger Markers" in Charismatic Religious Groups. *Colloquium*, *28*(1), 35–52.

Week 11: March 26th

True Crime Online

Glitsos, Laura., and Deuze, Mark. (2025). Serial killers and the production of the uncanny in digital participatory culture. *new media + society*, 27(10), 5691-5709.

Purhouse, Joe. (2020). 'Paedophile hunters,' criminal procedure, and fundamental human rights. *Journal of Law and Society*, 47(3), 384-411.

Yardley, Elizabeth., Lynes, Adam George Thomas., Wilson, David., and Kelly, Emma. (2018). What's the deal with 'websleuthing'? News media representations of amateur detectives in networked spaced. *Crime Media Culture*, 14(1), 81-109.

Week 12: April 2nd

True Crime Fandoms

o **March Madness Competition Day**

Broll, Ryan. (2020). Dark fandoms: An introduction and case study. *Deviant Behavior*, 41(6), 792-804

Dickson, E.J. (Oct.12, 2023). "His True-Crime Podcast Stood Up for Victims. Now, He's Been Accused of Abuse." *Rolling Stone*, Retrieved from: https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/last-podcast-on-the-left-ben-kissel-abuse-allegations-1234852755/

Fathallah, Judith. (2022). 'Being a fangirl of a serial killer is not ok': Gatekeeping Reddit's true crime community. *New Media & Society*, 26(10), 5638-5657.

Or

Fathallah, Judith. (2022). Reading serial killer fanfiction: What's fannish about it? *Humanities*, 11(65), 1-13.

April 3rd is a statutory holiday

April 8th classes follow a Friday schedule

<u>Policies</u>

Assignment Formatting & Preferred Citation Style
Either APA 7 or McGill legal citations are acceptable
(absolutely no MLA).

Please submit all assignments in Word format (.doc or .docx) via
Brightspace.

Assignments emailed to the instructor will not be graded; only
assignment uploaded via Brightspace will be marked.

Assignments uploaded in PDF will not receive the benefit of
track-changed feedback.

Emails
I endeavour to answer emails within 72 hours (not including
weekends or holidays).

Please do follow up if a response is not received after three
business days. Only emails sent from Carleton student accounts
may receive a reply.

Please ensure all communications with any university staff are
always professional and respectful in tone.

Please email or ask me any questions about the course or
materials—there is no such thing as a "bad" or "silly" question,
only questions left unasked and unanswered.

Accommodations and Extensions
Carleton is committed to providing academic accessibility for
all individuals. You may need special arrangements to meet your
academic obligations during the term. The accommodation request
processes, including information about the Academic
Consideration Policy for Students in Medical and Other
Extenuating Circumstances, are outlined on the Academic
Accommodations website.

Please let me know about any accommodations required to help you
be successful in your studies in this course and try to request
extensions as far in advance as possible. *Lack of planning on
your part does not constitute an emergency on mine.*

Late policy: There is a 5% per day late penalty and assignments
more than 7 days late may not be accepted.

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Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. **No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.**

A+ = 12.0	A+ = 6.0	A+ = 3.0	90-100%
A = 11.0	A = 5.5	A = 2.75	85-89%
A- = 10.0	A- = 5.0	A- = 2.5	80-84%
B+ = 9.0	B+ = 4.5	B+ = 2.25	77-79%
B = 8.0	B = 4.0	B = 2.0	73-76%
B- = 7.0	B- = 3.5	B- = 1.75	70-72%
C+ = 6.0	C+ = 3.0	C+ = 1.5	67-69%
C = 5.0	C = 2.5	C = 1.25	63-66%
C- = 4.0	C- = 2.0	C- = 1.0	60-62%
D+ = 3.0	D+ = 1.5	D+ = 0.75	57-59%
D = 2.0	D = 1.0	D = 0.5	53-56%

University and Departmental Policies

Academic Integrity

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as "presenting, <u>whether intentionally or not</u>, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own." This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source.

Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Academic dishonesty, in whatever form, is destructive to the values of the university, and risks harming the university's reputation as place of learning and innovation.

Furthermore, it is unfair and discouraging to those students who pursue their studies honestly

Plagiarism

The University Academic Integrity Policy defines plagiarism as "presenting, whether

intentionally or not, the ideas, expression of ideas or work of others as one's own." This includes reproducing or paraphrasing portions of someone else's published or unpublished material, regardless of the source, and presenting these as one's own without proper citation or reference to the original source. Examples of sources from which the ideas, expressions of ideas or works of others may be drawn from include but are not limited to: books, articles, papers, literary compositions and phrases, performance compositions, chemical compounds, artworks, laboratory reports, research results, calculations and the results of calculations, diagrams, constructions, computer

reports, computer code/software, material on the internet and/or conversations.

Examples of plagiarism include, but are not limited to:

• any submission prepared in whole or in part, by someone else, including the unauthorized use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT);

• using ideas or direct, verbatim quotations, paraphrased material, algorithms,

formulae, scientific or mathematical concepts, or ideas without appropriate acknowledgment in any academic assignment;

• using another's data or research findings without appropriate acknowledgement;

• submitting a computer program developed in whole or in part by someone else, with or without modifications, as one's own; and

• **failing to acknowledge sources through the use of proper citations when using another's work and/or failing to use quotations marks**.

<u>Plagiarism is a serious offence that cannot be resolved directly by the course's instructor.</u>

The Associate Dean of the Faculty conducts a rigorous investigation, including an interview with the student, when an instructor suspects a piece of work has been plagiarized. Penalties are not trivial. They can include a final grade of "F" for the course.

<u>Students are also prohibited from the use of any and all</u> generative artificial intelligence (AI) and/or language learning models (i.e., ChatGPT). Any such submission will be referred to the university's academic integrity office for review.

It is often very apparent when students rely on such tools in their academic assignments; it is more work to try to cover-up using these tools than to just do the assignment honestly. Your instructor is here to help you learn and develop your skills, please ask for help or clarification when it is needed. Academic dishonesty, such as using AI or any other form of plagiarism, is very serious.

Don't ask ChatGPT for help or ideas-- ask your instructor for help. You do not want to fail a course in your fourth year, and delay graduation plans due to an academic integrity offence.

Mental Health & Resources

As a student you may experience a range of mental health challenges that significantly impact your academic success and overall well-being. If you need help, please speak to someone. There are numerous resources available both on- and off-campus to support you. For more information, please consult https://wellness.carleton.ca/

Emergency Resources (on and off campus)

• Suicide Crisis Helpline: call or text 9-8-8, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

• For immediate danger or urgent medical support: call 9-1-1

Carleton Resources

• Mental Health and Wellbeing: https://carleton.ca/wellness/

• Health & Counselling Services: https://carleton.ca/health/

• Paul Menton Centre: https://carleton.ca/pmc/

• Academic Advising Centre (AAC): https://carleton.ca/academicadvising/

• Centre for Student Academic Support (CSAS): https://carleton.ca/csas/

• Equity & Inclusivity Communities: https://carleton.ca/equity/

Off Campus Resources

• Distress Centre of Ottawa and Region: call 613-238-3311, text 343-306-5550, or

connect online at https://www.dcottawa.on.ca/

• Mental Health Crisis Service: call 613-722-6914 or toll-free 1-866-996-0991, or

connect online at http://www.crisisline.ca/

• Empower Me Counselling Service: call 1-844-741-6389 or connect online at

https://students.carleton.ca/services/empower-me-counselling-services/

• Good2Talk: call 1-866-925-5454 or connect online at https://good2talk.ca/

• The Walk-In Counselling Clinic: for online or on-site service

https://walkincounselling.com

Course Calendar Link: https://calendar.carleton.ca/academicyear/